

## **‘Childless Children’. A Cross-Cultural Approach to Childlessness and Kinship**

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### **Abstract**

The conceptualizations and relations of people with no direct descendants are a field scarcely studied from Social Anthropology and has often been engulfed by the wide networks of family relationships. In this article, the concept “childless children” is proposed as an expression of the link between childlessness and kinship, that is, of the role of childless people in their family network. A cross-cultural perspective allows us to shape the social area of intersection between childlessness and kinship based on topic connections with: procreation as a duty, cultural palliatives to lack of reproduction, celibacy, circulation of children and intergenerational relationships.

**Key words:** kinship relationships, childlessness, procreation, upbringing, shared parenthood.

### **Introduction**

The demographic changes at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with an increase in life expectancy worldwide together with a decrease in birth rates (mainly in the Western world), imply that the issue of childlessness becomes particularly relevant. This article is not about children, or not only about children, but mainly about adults; those adults that have no children but, as they are part of a kinship network, develop parenting and kinship caring roles (taking care of children, adults, and elders).

The aim of this article is to present a first approach to a research on the relationships of people without direct descendants in the social and cultural field of kinship, that is, on the link between childlessness and kinship. The experiences, conceptualizations, and relations of childless people –individuals and couples– are a field scarcely studied from Social Anthropology and social sciences in general, and has often been engulfed by the wide networks of family relationships. In academic literature and in cultural experience, childless people have been socially silenced somehow or other. An anthropological perspective will allow us to go beyond quantitative data, encompassing the field of ideologies and relationships that account for behaviours concerning this topic.

From the classical Anthropology of Kinship, most studies on this issue have focused on the different cultural strategies that there exist to ensure descendants (i.e., the case of ghost marriage in the Nuer or the role of single children in the family core structures). But there is a lack of approaches that provide us with a better comprehension of the relational and socio-cultural range of childless people as well as to understand the differences and similarities in their conceptualization at a cross-cultural level.

The concept 'childless children' can help us better understand the real dimension of this proposal for the domain of kinship. The relationships, feelings, duties and obligations do not end with the incorporation of children into the group, but they represent the beginning of a long continuum that may last for a long time and, in some cases, may even continue after the occasional disappearance of a group member.

The studies on Kinship have been an essential part of Anthropology since its beginning. And they still are. The complex and changing social reality (new family organizations, new reproductive techniques, new parental relationships) leads us to constantly reconsider the basic principles of the Anthropology of Kinship. Nevertheless, the issue of childlessness does not often appear in literature or in anthropological praxis. And when it does appear, it is usually in a peripheral way. Therefore, I think that it is precisely in this issue where the originality of this proposal lies: showing how childless people have an active role in their kinship relationships, through intergenerational solidarity or shared care, despite their very often undervalued position in the family network.

It seems that, historically, people without direct descendants have accounted for a rather small percentage (they have been a minority<sup>1</sup>) and that the more accepted alternative to marriage and setting up a family has been the spiritual or religious path. However, at present, and not only in western societies, childless people are not socially silenced or watered down in kinship networks anymore, but they are perceived more and more as an emerging group with their own denomination (singles, dinks), and having children has gone from being a destination to becoming an option (English 1989). A cross-cultural study will allow us to understand the processes that have led to these changes in conceptualizations. Somehow the idea is to recover the role of these people, to make it visible, in the field of kinship.

To develop this proposal, it is essential to carry out a historical and cross-cultural review of the conceptions of 'childless children' and the roles that they have been given throughout time in different socio-cultural contexts. For this reason, a search is considered to be necessary

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<sup>1</sup> While in Asia or Africa the rate of celibacy it almost always remained below 1%, in Europe, it varied from approximately 4% to 20% (Knibiehler 1991:75)

from literature and file sources, being the digital version of Human Relations Area Files – eHRAF – the ethnographical reference. This literature review links thematic fields concerning childlessness and kinship with historical and ethnographic examples, with the aim of dimensioning this interrelation. It is not a cross-cultural comparative analysis, as available information does not exactly correspond either in content or in historical period. It is rather a cross-cultural tour about values and practices related to ‘childless children,’ to people without direct descendants as members of kinship groups.

### **Childlessness and Kinship. Theoretical Background and Ethnographic Sources**

This research is placed in the definition proposed by the getp-GRAFO (Research Group on Cross-Cultural Study of Kinship),<sup>2</sup> which considers the analysis of group reproduction processes, through the regulation of procreation, child adscription and rearing, as the specific object of the Anthropology of Kinship, as well as the relationships and representations that emerge among the people involved in this process.

In its enumerative form, the Anthropology of Kinship proposed would deal with:

1. Ideas, rules and customs concerning the procreation process
  - Ideologies about becoming a Human Being
  - Ideas, rules and cultural practices on reproductive sexuality and alternatives forms of reproduction
  - Ideas and cultural practices on pregnancy and delivery
  - Rules and customs concerning birth regulation/control
2. Adscription of children
  - Rules concerning the adscription to social groups.
  - Circulation of children
3. Care of children until they reach social maturity
  - People, groups or institutions that take care of children or are responsible for them.

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<sup>2</sup> Proposal presented and developed in A. González Echevarría *et al.* (2010) and in J.Grau, D. Rodríguez and H.Valenzuela (2011).

- Rules, customs and models of behaviour concerning child care and taking on final responsibility for their socialization and enculturation.
4. Representations that structure procreation, adscription and rearing processes
    - Cultural statement of the need to have children
  5. Relationships, culturally patterned feelings and representations that emerge and are set up from procreation, adscription and child rearing processes among people involved, and that develop throughout life
    - Intra- and intergenerational relationships
    - Responsibilities concerning dependent people
    - Kinship and support networks
    - Transmission of material, social and symbolic heritage.

Thus defined, the Anthropology of Kinship does not only deal with the contexts where children are procreated, brought up and cared for, and all those aspects related to responsibilities of socialization and enculturation of these children. The relationships that emerge from the existence, movement and responsibility towards the children also include the world of childless adults. The lack of children –voluntary or involuntary- does not imply a lack of relationships and responsibilities in the Kinship network.

Every research springs from some starting questions that lead to the objectives. Here the main question comes from the very definition of the domain 'Anthropology of Kinship' proposed by the getp-GRAFO. Then, if the definition is based on the management of child procreation as well as the relationships and representations that emerge, the consequent question is: what happens when you have no children? Moreover, how do you build kinship relationships when you have no descendants? What role do childless people have in their family network?

The hypotheses about the link between childlessness and kinship presented in this research are the following ones:

- Relationships (behaviours, rights, duties, obligations, feelings, etc.) that emerge from the existence, circulation, care, responsibilities and enculturation of children also include the world of childless adults. This field has been scarcely studied from Anthropology, mainly because until recently it has been absorbed in the wide networks of group relationships that traditionally make up the domain of kinship.

- Kinship models are frameworks of reference for all the members (with or without children) of any socio-cultural group. Throughout history, in the different cultures, not all childlessness situations have been equally valued ('bachelor'/'spinster' for instance). But whatever the conceptualization is, childless people have gone on having relationships and positions in their kinship groups; because they are part of their kinship model and, in this case, it is not so much the fact of 'not having children' as that of 'being children' (understood as members of the kinship group).

The first hypothesis is basically an approach of historical and cross-cultural literature analysis. The second one focuses on the relational aspects of people without direct descendants inside Kinship. These hypothetical approaches assume that there is actually this field of relationships between childless people and their kinship groups, and that from Anthropology in general and the Anthropology of Kinship in particular there has been scarce research about this issue with a cross-cultural perspective.

Concerning the search of cross-cultural ethnographic data we must be aware that it will be a partial cross-cultural review, as it is impossible to reach all the existing sources, but with the intention that it can be as wide and diverse as to cover all geographical areas, although not all cultures. However comprehensive such an exploration can be, it will hardly be complete.

In the specific case of ethnographic information about kinship and childlessness collected in the online version of HRAF (eHRAF World Cultures), data come from the analysis of 64 documents with references about 40 cultures of a total of 258, classified into 8 cultural regions: 10 from Africa (Akan/Ashanti, Dogon, Fellahim, Gikuyu, Gusii, Igbo, Luo, San, Wolof, Zulu), 14 from Asia (Ainu, Eastern Toradja, Gond, Garo, Iban, Ifugao, Javanese, Malays, Monguor, Santal, Taiwan, Tamil, Yakut, Yi), 4 from Europe (Greeks, Highland Scots, Sami, Serbs), 2 from Central America and the Caribbean (Garifuna, Zapotec), 4 from the Middle East (Bedouin, Israelis, Lur, Palestinians), 3 from North America (Amish, Pomo, Sea Islanders), 2 from Oceania (Chuuk, Trobriands), and 1 from South America (Saramaka). At a chronological level, the studies range from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 90s in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

The review of other literature, mainly studies related to the Anthropology of Kinship, allows us to complete the ethnographic data collected by HRAF with historical and contemporary cross-cultural information. The lack of social visibility for the role of childless people in their family group networks implies that information about patterns, ideas and values associated to the 'childless' as members of kinship groups is disseminated in different studies and analyses about kinship in general. To find these data, we have to trace other associated issues that

have aroused interest from anthropological studies: marriage, celibacy, sterility, households, inheritance, primogeniture, second children, core family, etc.

### **Conceptualizations about procreation childlessness and celibacy**

In the field of representations about procreation processes, the cultural statement of the need to have children as well as the processes that lead couples or individuals to the decision of having children are the structuring idea, but these assessments are changing, at least in the western world, where the number of couples or individuals that have no children or decide not to have them is increasing<sup>3</sup>. The ideas and conceptualizations about procreation or lack of it correspond to points 1 and 4 in the list definition on the field of Anthropology of Kinship mentioned in the previous section (the ideas, norms and customs concerning the procreation process and the representations that articulate the processes of child procreation, adscription and rearing).

The social images towards childless people are directly influenced by the importance given to procreation. All human societies are based on a common demand: that of their reproduction, which implies that of their members. In Malinowski's words, this is a 'basic social need,' the cultural concomitant of which would be all the fabric concerning kinship organization. But this demand is not understood just as a multiplication of individuals. Fatherhood/motherhood are also given other roles, with ensuring the group's social survival by caring and enculturating their descendants being outstanding, among them. And this, almost always arranged through the institution of marriage as the most accepted social environment to regulate procreation, with there being a close relationship between fertility and marriage.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some demographic data collected in Europe (*Childlessness in Europe*. Research Report to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 2002-2003), point that childlessness as a general phenomenon has been present throughout history, affecting about 20% of population of childbearing age. In the past, the main cause of childlessness was due to reasons of infertility (10-15%) and issues related to abject poverty and nutritional deficits, as well as low marriage rates as a result of war conflicts and migratory flows. At present, there has been a significant change. The New Reproductive Techniques are pointed out to be the main responsible for the decrease in infertility, achieving a 3-5% reduction. And, despite all this, in the western context, there is still a childlessness rate of about 20%. This is so because the aspect that is increasing is the voluntary character of childlessness.

<sup>4</sup> If, as pointed at, there is clear link between marriage and fertility, a correlation between divorce and childlessness should also have to be expected. And so it seems in many cases of marriage annulment petitions, where difficulties in procreation are accepted as the main reason for divorce. This happens among the Toradja in the Celebes Islands, the Wolof in Senegambia, the Ifugao in the Philippines, and traditionalist Israelis, among other cultures

The biological imperative of human reproduction culturally shows in different ways, either by emphasizing the need for group continuity (lineage, clan, or family group), the civic functionality that procreating implies, or the religious responsibility towards ancestors.

The ideas about procreation and childlessness are often reinforced by symbolic-religious explanations where responsibility is shared by humans (mainly women) and Gods. Thus, causes of infertility may result from punishment by gods or spirits due to some offence (as is the case in the Zulu from South Africa and in Greek tradition, eHRAF), from witchcraft and the evil eye (in the case of African Gikuyu and Gusii, the Ifugao in the Philippines, the Santal from India, and the Fellahin in Egypt, eHRAF) or from not complying with some ritual practice (among the Ashanti in Ghana and the Toradja in the Celebes Islands, eHRAF). Childlessness is conceived not only as part of a curse from the gods, spirits or ancestors, but also as a disease and, consequently, there is a large amount of therapeutic treatments to palliate it.

In many African and Animistic societies (Héritier 1996), it is through marriage and fatherhood that the prestige of a man is built in his life and after as an ancestor to be honoured. Not transmitting life is breaking a chain where no-one is the final end, and therefore it implies blocking the access to the statute of ancestor. Moreover, a woman is not considered as such (adult woman) until she has procreated. Fons (1997) also explained how, among the Ndowé in Equatorial Guinea, an individual cannot enter in the position of ancestor without progeny.

This duty and obligation to procreate translates into a strong pressure on women, and implies a discourse about the female responsibility for sterility. In Africa, it is an argument, as Héritier (1985) observed, that refers to social practice and associated behaviour rules where sterility extends to the feminine, always and everywhere. Thus, it insistently shows something of the social relationship between genders. Male sterility itself is not important, and therefore it needs not be identified or recognised as such. Kaplan (1998) observed the same when explaining that, in Senegambian population (Mandinka, Wolof, Serer, Fula, Toucouleur, Soninke, Jola): 'the responsibility for sterility always falls on the woman. The man ejaculates and, therefore, it is the woman who has to develop the seed placed in her womb. When many of the wives that a man has are 'sterile' it is said that there is a curse on that family and the wives are to blame' (Kaplan 1998:142, translated by the author).

Childlessness and singlehood have been two closely articulated situations, at least until very recently. It has been from the introduction and extension of NRT (New Reproductive

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(eHRAF); we can also find this correspondence in the case of societies in Micronesia (del Valle 1987).



Technologies) and changes in the moral conceptualizations of reproduction options, mainly in the West, when procreation on one's own has stopped being considered as a social anomaly or a serious offence for the family honour. Celibacy, outside priesthood, has been socially disapproved of in the most traditional societies, and has represented a type of discrimination and social exclusion. Lévi-Strauss, in his article 'The Family,' points at the feeling of repulsion that many societies show with respect to celibacy:

In general, we can say that, among the so-called urban tribes, *there are no single people as they simply could not survive*. One of the most moving moments in my fieldwork among the Bororo was when I met a man, in his early 30s, dirty, undernourished, sad, and lonely. When I asked whether the man was severely ill, the answer the natives gave me was a shock: there was nothing in particular about the man, except for the fact that he was a bachelor. (1984 [1956]: 20-21, translated by the author).

Celibacy has not only been presented as a social contraindication, but also has been conceptualized as a danger, and even has been criminalized. In Arabic Islam, for instance, celibacy was considered as a danger for the moral and social order, in Romania the attitude of those who reject procreation was even considered to be criminal, and in Norway it is understood as breaking the social contract (Héritier 1996; Torrens 2008; and Casado 2011).

Singlehood as the perfect manifestation of free choice is a recent and western invention. Héritier (1996) pointed that the individual choice for celibacy as a way of life only happens in modern societies, and to do so it is necessary to have the notion of individual, the idea that the individual's interests take precedence over those of the group, or the certainty that the person's fulfilment does not necessarily imply the creation of descendants. But most human societies have protected themselves from primary celibacy,<sup>5</sup> antisocial act par excellence, which is simultaneously the very negation of the individual, as this is considered as completely fulfilled in and by marriage. And if there are societies that admit or recommend primary celibacy, this is usually for more economic than ethical reasons: there are assets to be transmitted, intact if possible.

Due to its possible incidence on asset transfer, celibacy becomes part of economic and demographic family strategies. On one hand, it helps to reduce the rate of reproduction and can act as a form of contraception. On the other, it limits the fragmentation of the heritages (Knibiehler 1991:77) and has the advantage of impeding any private transfer of assets to the descendants, though not to the collaterals.

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<sup>5</sup> Héritier (1996: 237) distinguishes between primary celibacy and that of widowed and divorced people.



Celibacy as an economic-family strategy, because it implies saving money in forced heirship and dowry, is a pattern mainly particular to country people. Both Bourdieu (1962), in the French case, and Barrera (1990), in the Catalan case, show the relationship among undivided inheritance, demographic control, and geographical mobility. In this way, there is more celibacy in rural areas with undivided inheritance. Both authors showed how the high rates of celibacy could be understood as a strategy of the household to adapt to the historic-economic ups and downs; those with strictly domestic causes, as well as the general ones. Celibacy is an efficient mechanism to face more or less long periods of economic or political crisis; as a single uncle or aunt may represent for the household to save money in a dowry and get two arms to deal with household chores. The core family shows here, as in many other aspects that it is a flexible, dynamic, and efficient institution to carry out tasks of group progress or mere survival. Bestard (1998) also explains that the age of marriage could increase in periods where the population's growth could represent an obstacle to capital accumulation, as the positive relation between population and wealth is reversed. On the contrary, it could decrease when greater labour force was needed. Finally, the proportion of single people could also fluctuate and thus have an important incidence on the regulation of population.

### **Alternatives to childlessness and cultural practices for child adscription**

The cultural patterns that societies carry out with respect to fertility and infertility, childbearing and childlessness are particularly relevant for this research<sup>6</sup>. Norms and customs concerning birth regulation and control, and corrective treatments for female or male infertility are directly related to the conceptualization of childlessness and with the different forms of child circulation; points 1 and 2 in the list definition proposed for the Anthropology of Kinship as theoretical background.

If procreation is a duty, not having children becomes a serious inconvenience. In practically all the societies, there is some kind of socio-cultural pattern that allows people to palliate the

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<sup>6</sup> Infertility and childlessness are closely associated concepts, but they do not mean the same. Basically, and broadly speaking, infertility is understood to be the biological inability to have children, and is associated with medical and health conditions. Childlessness, however, refers to the condition of not having procreated, of not having children, whether biologically or via adoption and the many forms of child circulation. The field of childlessness includes that of infertility, but it does not exhaust it: it goes beyond, also incorporating all those situations where voluntarily or involuntarily (and not just due to sterility reasons) people have decided not to have descendants. That is, not all childless people are so because they are infertile and not all infertile people end up being childless, as through the NRT or adoption they can have children. For a wider comprehension of the phenomenon of infertility, see M.C. Inhorn and Frank van Balen (2002).

effects of childlessness. Adoption (inside and outside kinship) is the most common practice so that those involuntarily childless couples and people can have children. Grau (2010), in his cross-cultural study about child circulation, stated that 'the motivations underlying child circulation among individuals and groups may be diverse, but never at random. Among the most frequent, which may happen in isolation or in combination, there are: to palliate infertility/childlessness, to ensure future care during old age...' (2010:223-224, translated by the author). As we can actually find in Malaysia (eHRAF) and in Micronesia (del Valle 1987), where adoption gives children to those who cannot have them, with preference given to relatives of the wife or the husband's sister (the matrilineal predominance in these islands of Oceania being essential). Particularly, in Phonpei adoption motives are social and economic. This transaction is promoted when couples have no children so that they can provide them with care in their old age. The cases described by E. Goody in West Africa (Goody, E.N. 1982) also provide us with interesting examples of child circulation among relatives –fostering or adoption- in order to overcome infertility and especially in cases of family crisis due to disease or death of the mother or divorce of the parents.

Adoption inside kinship in cases of childlessness can affect not only married couples, but also widows or widowers. This is the case of the adoption of a nephew by a childless widow in China as a means to ensure the continuity of her husband's lineage. Another very present pattern in this sense is the wide diversity of child fostering services, usually involving kinship networks. This would be the case of '*afillament*' (fostering) in rural traditional Catalonia, Spain (Barrera 1990), or the temporary adoption among the Ndowé, Equatorial Guinea (Fons 1997), just to mention a couple of examples geographically and culturally distant.

Françoise Héritier, in *Masculin-Féminin* (1996), observed how the issue of palliatives to sterility –of special interest for the contemporary world- has always been tackled in all societies. And how many African societies have developed patterns that are just social solutions to the biological problem of infertility. Among the Samo, for example, an impotent or sterile man has so many children as his legitimate wives have given him while he was alive, unless he expressly waived this right. Or among the Haya, a Bantu people, the first postpartum sexual intercourse will appoint the man who will be the father of the next child (married but childless men reach agreements with fertile women to have this privilege acknowledged through economic compensations, and thus acquire descendants). Likewise, the well-known case of marriage between Nuer women is also an example of this palliative dynamics.

In polygamous societies, polygyny has been the most usual way to correct childlessness, both in the past and now. Yolanda Aixelà, in her work on gender in Morocco (*Mujeres en*

Marruecos. *Un análisis desde el parentesco y el género*, 2000) explains how the original polygyny proposed in Quran, with a maximum of four wives, 'not only is current (arts. 29 al. 2 and 31 of *Mudawwana* or family code), but it is also defended by Moroccan public institutions as a good marriage formula for those cases where the wife has a physical disability, is *sterile* or not very pleasing during sexual intercourse' (2000: 187-188, translated by the author). Among the Gikuyu in Kenya, many polygenic marriages are also strategic responses to childlessness and, in these cases the wife supports her husband's decision of marrying a second wife (eHRAF).

### **Childlessness, shared care, and intergenerational relationships**

The field of the shared care in general, is an area that highlights the link between childlessness and kinship, emphasizing the parental roles and care who may perform other relatives in the upbringing of children and in the care of the elderly and sick, in the domestic family sphere. In this section, there is the correspondence between points 3 and 5 of the list definition of Anthropology of Kinship proposed by getp-GRAFO (child care until they are socially mature and the relationships, culturally patterned feelings and representations that develop and emerge from the processes of procreation, adscription and rearing among people involved, all over their lives).

Throughout history and in many societies, childless single people have basically had two possibilities: to stay at their family home of origin, under the authority of their father or eldest brother in the case of primogeniture; or priesthood. In the case of staying in the family domestic environment, childless relatives had productive and intergenerational care –for children and old people- roles as those relatives with children, but in a less socially visible way. Many studies highlight these options, whether in Middle Ages Europe, Medieval Japan, in Islamic countries, or in more contemporary rural Mediterranean countries (see *Historia de la Familia*, *Mundos lejanos, mundos antiguos*, v.I, 1998). Just one more ethnographic note: Barrera's (1990) and Ponce and Ferrer's (1994) studies on the changes in rural Catalonia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are clear examples of this position. Despite the scarce ethnography collected about the *tietes* (aunts) in contrast with that related to the *onclos* (uncles), both works pointed at the sometimes important role as advisers, and material and moral support of single sons or brothers; and how the weight of domestic and caring chores fell on single daughters or sisters –together with the other women in the group-.

Some of the examples analyzed by Fonseca (2004) about shared motherhood patterns in Brazil refer not only to caring, but also to shared rearing; as when she explains the case of a

single woman who took charge of her sister's son because she was too young to bring him up or when she explains the inexistence of tensions caused by these local practices of shared rearing: 'a single aunt feels obliged to help her needy niece if she has given her the present that a child is. Blood ties and generational differences help to clarify terms of child transfer - and establish a clear hierarchy among the different mothers of a child-' (2004:107, translated by the author).

It is in the domain of intergenerational relationships where the relationship between childlessness and kinship is most obviously expressed; also in the field of care and responsibilities concerning dependent people. Kinship relationships are, among other things, support networks and in this area childless relatives act and count as relatives with children. Also, when it comes to the transmission of material, social and symbolic assets, 'childless children' contribute to family continuity.

With respect to age, Kinship networks work as an important organizational support for economic and political relationships, and provide with a wide network of personal support relationships. Households, almost everywhere, and the local community, in traditional societies, are usually the support units for the elderly in a population. The family acts as an institution of distributional reciprocity in dependence burdens (children, elderly, and ill people). It is interesting to see how this care for the dependent elderly will be carried out more or less effectively depending on the internal cohesion and common interests of the units of relatives (Narotzky 1991), as well as on the ideology of mutual help and reciprocity channelled through their beliefs.

In the last few years, there have been radical changes in dependent elderly care, both in western societies and in more traditional ones. Usually, the elderly would be cared for in their family environment, as this was a responsibility of the family: To take care for their elderly. At present, there has been, particularly in the West, an increase in the professionalization of such care with the creation of old age institutions.

In the case of age, the gender perspective has to be considered in two senses: First, the population of elderly women is higher than that of men; and second, women are still the main responsible for care tasks, whether concerning children or the elderly. In the family environment: wives, daughters, sisters, daughters-in-law, nieces...; in the institutions or in extra-family care: female nurses, geriatric auxiliaries...; and in the case of family carers: immigrant women.

When presenting the issue of childlessness as linked to kinship and old age, it is clear from the literature (Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill 2005) and file review (eHRAF) that, in more

traditional societies, not having children may affect the survival of the elderly themselves. Thus, among the !Kung San in Western Botswana, for instance, elderly parents will be taken care of by their children, and without this care their survival is difficult, so the main element to ensure not only a good old age but also one's own survival in this period is to have one or more adult children. However, there are usually cultural patterns that provide a solution. Among the Iban in Western Malaysia, adoption has been and is the traditional system of social security in old age. And Goody (1976) observed that, in traditional societies, childless or very poor old people have support not only from kinship groups, but also from associations they previously belonged to.

But, in general, as described in San Román (1990), childless old people are the population group most likely to be discriminated, to be left without care, to be admitted to hospital, and even to be ill-treated, depending on their own financial resources and the existence of a wide network of relatives.

### **Conclusions and further research**

The review that has been realized so far of ethnographic data shows the scant information about cultural patterns, ideas and values associated with 'childless children' as members of kinship groups existing in the anthropological literature in general, which expresses the lack of social visibility of childless people within the family group networks. In the case of eHRAF, it is worth reminding that, out of the 258 referenced cultures, there is information linking kinship and childlessness only in 40 of them, scarcely 15% of the total, and if the search focuses on linking kinship, childlessness and old age, references are reduced to only 6 societies (2.3%). These data reinforce the first hypothesis proposed.

In relation to the second hypothesis and following the enumerative definition proposed by getp-GRAFO for the domain of the Anthropology of Kinship, it seems appropriate and necessary to analyze the link we propose between Childlessness and Kinship. Conceiving procreation as a duty, the discourse on sterility, cultural patterns that act as palliative to childlessness, and the conceptualization of celibacy are issues that correspond to the ideas, rules and customs related to the procreation process and also to the representations that articulate this process. In most cases, the assessment of childlessness, traditionally and outside the religious field, is a problem to be solved. The different forms of adoption and foster care within kinship refer to the context of child adscription. The traditional possibilities of childless people to remain within their family groups, to stay at their parents' or eldest brother's homes, cooperating in child rearing and elderly care, is directly related to the item

concerning child care until they reach social maturity and to the field of relationships that are set up and develop from procreation, adscription and rearing processes among the people involved throughout life. Childless adult relatives, in a similar way to those with children, take part in productive tasks, intervene as active members in the family support networks, have responsibilities in relation to dependent relatives, and act as transmitters of material, social and symbolic assets of the entire kinship group.

In this cross-cultural itinerary, there are still issues that have been presented but not in full detail. Among them, the aspects related to gender inequalities stand out. In the field of childlessness, there is a clear sexual distinction that results in unequal social considerations towards those men and women that for different reasons have not had any child. Just until recently, in the Western world –and probably also in other geographic-cultural areas- a single man and a single woman did not have the same social consideration; it was not the same to be a ‘bachelor’ than to be a ‘spinster.’ In parallel with this unequal social position between men and women, the former case was considered as a status of certain independence, whereas the latter was a situation of failure and lack. In the family environment, both single men and women would hold a marginal and dependent position, but women still more so just for the fact of being women. The domestic context acts as a mirror of the society it develops in and at the same time it reproduces it.

Procreation-oriented sexuality and the different expressions of sexuality are also relevant in research on childlessness and kinship. Homosexuality –associated to childlessness, as well- has been differently considered throughout time, from absolute rejection to some tolerance and social acceptance, depending on the cultures and changes in moral assessments occurring in every one of them. Also in this topic, ethnography about female homosexuality is rather scarcer than that about male homosexuality, and less diverse. In the complex and varied domain of sexual orientation, other forms of the model of gender variance and sexuality, such as the third gender, hermaphrodite genders, or the two-spirit traditions of Berdache (Nieto 2003), have to be taken into account.

This research is, in short, about those childless people and couples who, as members of households and wider family groups, develop parenting and kinship roles. The lack of children does not imply lack of other responsibilities within the family. What’s more, childless does not mean without a family and even less without relatives.

### **Acknowledgments**



I am grateful to the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (SEJ2006-10864-SOCI, MCYT) for funding this research. This contribution is part of the project 'Cross-cultural theory of reproduction in human groups: Anthropology of Kinship as a study of socio-cultural models of procreation and child rearing' a R+D+I project of the getp-GRAFO (Research Group on Cross-cultural Study of Kinships, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) conducted by Dr. Aurora González Echevarría.

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#### **Online Ethnographic Files**

Human Relations Area Files, eHRAF World Cultures. <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu>

#### **Research Report**

*Childlessness in Europe*. Research Report to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on the project funded by research grant RES-000-23-0074, 2002-2003.